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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 08 NOUAKCHOTT 000431

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SUBJECT: SITREP 7: COUP IN MAURITANIA

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MARK M. BOULWARE FOR REASON 1.4 B AND D

FNDD holds rally

¶1. (SBU) The National Front for the Defense of Democracy (FNDD), a coalition of six political parties opposed to the military coup, held a two-hour rally at the old stadium in Nouakchott. FSNs report a peaceful gathering of 3000-3500 attendees, with police present only to direct traffic. FNDD bused in supporters and handed out water. Jamil Ould Mansour, president of the islamist Tawassoul party spoke first, saying that Mauritanian politics needs to break its historical cycle of coups and elections. He said that the coup plotters "will meet justice" and called for the return of Abdallahi to power. He stated that it was popular pressure that was responsible for the release of the former prime minister and the other arrestees. Former Prime Minister Yahya Ould Ahmed Waghef, who was released from military custody shortly beforehand, spoke next. He noted that former president Abdallahi was in good health and high spirits. He refuted the militarys justifications for the coup, arguing that the former presidents firing of the generals on 6 August and his refusal to call an extraordinary session of parliament were both legal and were carried out transparently. Mohammed Ould Mouloud, president of the leftist Union of Forces for Progress (UFP) party spoke next, saying that he will not accept any new elections and called for the military to stay out of politics. Comment: FSNs note that this is the first time Mauritanian history that there is organized and sizable opposition to a military coup, which indicates that the brief period of democracy may have lowered MauritaniansQ, tolerance for such extra-constitutional regime changes.

Military releases arrestees

¶2. (C) At approx. 16:00 the High State Council released all those who were arrested during the coup except for former president Abdallahi All the released arrestees appeared in public shortly thereafter at the FNDD rally. Ambassador phoned Abdallahis son and was passed to Prime Minister Waghef who confirmed that President Abdallahi was in good health and high spirits.

High State Council issues a decree on its powers

13. (U) The High State Council issued a decree late last night delimiting its own authority. The decree is as follows:

The armed and security forces through the High State Council have put an end to the power of the President of the Republic who was inaugurated on April 19, 2007, and they have decided to take the appropriate measures in order to guarantee the continuity of the State and to supervise, in consultation with the institutions, the political forces and the civil society, the conduct of presidential elections that will allow to re-launch the democratic process in the country and re-found it on perennial basis.

They commit themselves before the Mauritanian people to organize, in a time period that will be the shortest possible, free and transparent elections that will allow, in the future, a continuous and harmonious operating of the whole constitutional powers.

They proclaim their will to respect all international commitments made on the name of the State and to adhere to the principles devoted by the universal human rights Declaration, the UN Charter, the Arab League, the African Union, and the Islamic Conference Organization.

Without causing offense, more than necessary, to the provisions of the July 20, 1991 modified Constitution, the present constitutional law order has the objective to define the temporary powers of the High State Council.

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Article 1: The armed and security forces exercise, through the High State Council, the necessary powers for the reorganizing and conduct of the State and the public affairs during the period necessary for organizing presidential elections, in accordance with the provisions of the present constitutional law.

Article 2: The powers of the President of the Republic inaugurated on April 19, 2007 have been ended. The powers reserved to the President of the Republic under the terms of the July 20, 1991 modified Constitution, are exercised, in the collegial form, by the High State Council.

Article 3: The High State Council designates its president in the forms provided for by the Council internal regulation. The President is accountable before the High State Council. The members of the High Council are appointed through law order issued by the High State Council.

Article 4: The High State Council meets in ordinary sessions every thirty days and, as necessary, in extraordinary session when convened by its President or at the request of the two thirds of its members.

Article 5: without damage of other constitutional attributions reserved for the President and the provisions of article 6 hereinafter, the High State Council exercises the executive power and in particular the prerogatives provided for at articles 23 through 39 of title II of the modified Constitution of July 20, 1991.

Acts concerned with the High State Council under the terms of the present law order bear the signature of the President of the High Council preceded by:

"For the High State Council,
The President"

The President of the High State Council presides, on behalf of the institution, the Cabinet meeting and other authorities that the Constitution places under the Presidency of the Republic.

Article 6: The President of the High State Council appoints the Prime Minister and the Ministers and puts an end to their functions in the conditions provided for by the Constitution. He appoints at civil and military positions.

Article 7: In case of absence or prevention of the High State Council President, he is replaced in his functions according to the forms provided for by the Council internal regulation.

Article 8: The Parliament, the Higher Council of the Magistrature, the Constitutional Council, the Tribunal Courts, the High Justice Court, the High Islamic Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Audit Court, and the municipalities continue to exercise their competencies in accordance with texts that govern them.

When for any reason, the operation of the parliament is blocked, the High State Council enacts by ordinance the measures with legislative force that are necessary for guaranteeing the continuing of public powers and for guaranteeing freedom and transparency of the scheduled presidential elections. Ordinances issued in application of the present article cannot, in any case, cause offense to the public and individual freedoms recognized by the Constitution and the laws of the republic.

Article 9: The provisions of the modified Constitution of July 20, 1991, contrary or incompatible with the present constitutional ordinance, are codified as necessary and this, during the period necessary for organizing presidential elections and at the inauguration of the elected President of the republic.

Article 10: The present constitutional ordinance will be modified and completed as a need be by constitutional ordinance from the High State Council.

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Article 11: The present constitutional ordinance will be published according to the emergency procedure an in the Official Journal.

Comment: Unlike the rules that the 2005 junta established for itself, this decree offers no specific timetable for elections and does not bar junta members from running for office. Article 8 is particularly concerning, as it effectively gives the High State Council legislative authority as well. This modification to Aziz's original pledge to suspend only the Executive was likely driven by the refusal of the President of the National Assembly to recognize the coup.

High State Council sacks Mauritanian ambassadors

14. (U) Local media reports that the High State Council sacked a number of Mauritanian ambassadors considered close to former president Abdallahi including the Mauritanian ambassador to the United States Dia Ibraima, the Mauritanian ambassador to France Lematt Mint Ewnen, and the Mauritanian ambassador to Mali Sidamine Ould Ahmed Challa.

Other internal reactions

15. (C) Post continues to poll sources outside of Nouakchott for reaction to the crisis. Responses include:

-- Yacoub Ould Salem Vall, Popular Alliance for Progress (APP) mayor of Zouerat, Tiris Zemmour - The reactions in Zouerat were largely against the coup. The rally that was

staged there saw the participation of more cars than people. The town is controlled by commercial syndicates that don't favor the coup. The mayor said that he did not attend the pro-coup demonstration.

-- NFah Ouattara, regional representative in Kaedi, Gorgol for the NGO Counterpart International - People are more concerned about the delay in the rains than the political situation. But the majority of the people disapprove of the coup. The State Council has pressured some local leaders in order to demonstrate. One demonstration took place but no prominent leader attended.

-- Mohammed Ould Mohammedou, independent mayor of Lekhcheb, a town near Tidjikja, Tagant - Most people, particularly the poor, in the area favor the coup, because they blame former president Abdellahi for rising food prices.

-- Aminetou Mint Maouloud, Adil MP from Aleg, Brakna - This is a step backward. People in Aleg no longer trust the military. One tribe (Ehel Youma) held a small pro-coup demonstration but not many others joined them.

-- Sall Kalidou, community leader from Rosso, Trarza - Rosso is the home district of Senator Sidi Mohammed Ould Mohsen, one of Abdellahi's staunchest critics in the Senate. Mohsen has organized pro-coup demonstrations but most citizens continue their daily lives unconcerned with the political situation.

-- Yahya Traore, community leader from Kankossa, Assaba - People demonstrated in support of the coup as soon as the news broke out. Two days later, another pro-coup demonstration was organized by members of the PRDR and independent politicians in the town. People came from Kankossa but also from surrounding villages.

Meeting with Chinese Ambassador

16. (C) Ambassador met August 11 with the Chinese Ambassador who reported he had met with General Aziz and received the familiar explanation of the coup. The Chinese Ambassador

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told Aziz the Chinese Government made a point not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and wished to see the rapid restoration of political stability given the presence of some 1,300 Chinese citizens in Mauritania. The Chinese Ambassador worried that a prolonged political impasse might spark additional coups.

Meeting with Saudi Ambassador

17. (C) Ambassador Boulware met August 12 with the Saudi Ambassador and urged him to help the generals find a way to restore constitutional order. The Saudi Ambassador noted his nation's condemnation of the coup told Ambassador Boulware that he would discuss what further action to take with his government.

Meeting with World Bank Representative

18. (C) The Ambassador met August 12 with World Bank representative Francois Rantura. He explained that his local staff had been on administrative leave up until now in response to the August 6 coup but has plans to bring them back on shortly. In addition, he prepared an analysis of the impact of the coup on their relationship with the government and projects, in accordance with World Bank

procedures. He is currently at work on a good governance roadmap that partners could use to guide their relationship with a new regime.

Meeting with EU Ambassadors and UNDP Res Rep

¶9. (C) Ambassador met again August 11 with EU Ambassadors and UNDP Res Rep to share information and coordinate positions. Both UNDP Res Rep Ribeiro and French Ambassador Vandepoorter indicated that they had had separate follow on meetings with General Aziz after the presentation of the joint demarche. French Ambassador left a written copy of the EU demarche and reaffirmed Frances firm position and President Sarkozys personal interest in Mauritania and the welfare of President Abdallahi. UNDP Res Rep Ribeiro urged that Aziz remain engaged with the international community and more clearly articulate the intentions of the "High State Council." A tired Aziz reportedly responded that he had done nothing but meet with ambassadors and envoys for several days and that he was seeking legal and political advice that would permit the council to lay out its plans. Amid a general and somewhat unfocused discussion of the role and intention of parliamentarians both the French and American Ambassadors observed that no actions taken while the military was in power would be legitimate. World Bank Representative Rantrua, just back from leave, joined the group, as well, and noted that the GIRMs cash reserves were not substantial. He also said that the Bank was also obliged to take measures in the event of a coup and that he would be looking at that.

Meeting with Presidential Principal Counselor Ennahoui

¶10. (C) DCM met evening of August 11 with President Abdallahis Principal Counselor Khalil Ould Ennahoui (PROTECT) at Ennahouis residence. Ennahoui is one of Abdallahis closer confidants and has been responsible for high-profile development portfolios (the U.S. MCC program and Gulf investment relations) as well as the Governments food emergency "Special Intervention Program." Ennahoui, who continues to exercise his functions at the Presidency, spoke at length about the Presidents relationship with the military, the current crisis, and possible solutions.

¶11. (C) The Ever-Deteriorating Relationship: Ennahoui placed himself among those who had warned Abdallahi about the military from the beginning believing that, for all the talk of transition to democracy, it would be only a matter

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of time before they moved against the new president. Abdallahi told him, "We have work to do and we cant get it done if we dont trust our colleagues and the military are our colleagues." Abdallahi sought to find a working accommodation with Aziz from the beginning essentially giving him free rein on security matters in exchange for control over politics. Abdallahi found, instead, that Aziz constantly encroached further into politics and consistently broke commitments each time Abdallahi though he had established a new cohabitation agreement. During the beginning of the political crisis in June, Aziz assured Abdallahi of support just before the President departed for the AU Summit in Egypt -- only to launch the censure motion leading to the collapse of the first Waghef government. After the second Waghef government had been established, a cabinet "stuffed with the generals ministers," Abdallahi though he had finally appeased Aziz only to have him launch efforts leading to an impeachment process while Aziz was in Spain. Abdallahi, according to Ennahoui, fired the generals fully aware it would lead to a coup in order to forestall what he believed was coming -- the beginning of a parliamentary investigation for corruption followed by a

military-inspired public rampage of the palace during which the military would "rescue the president" but be forced to take power if ever so reluctantly. Ennahoui said that by the end, Abdallahi was under constant military audio surveillance. Abdallahi told him "I'm the only one that gains from a coup" (because he emerges as a martyr for democracy) but that he continued to appease to avoid the damage a coup would do to the country.

¶12. (C) Political Situation: Ennahoui was pleased with the release earlier in the day of all detainees except the President and with the large anti-coup rally held during the day. He saw U.S. and French positions as key in having undermined military confidence in the coup but was not overly confident of success. He saw that "after a few weeks everyone will get used to this" and saw the need for even greater pressure on the junta. Adding, "as much as I hate to see the harm it will do the people," he saw cutting off the money as the best leverage on the military. Specifically, he saw the U.S. as potentially key in getting Gulf states to threaten to turn off the \$1.5 billion in investments on stream. As the Presidency's lead with Qatar, he said that in a late June meeting with the Emir the Qatari had said, "radicalism in your country will only be defeated by democracy which you must continue to advance" -- promising to build Mauritania -- the largest parliament building in the Arab world in recognition of Mauritania's democracy. Ennahoui saw the Emir personally as being willing to use pending investments (financing a new airport, an iron ore processing plant, Mauritania's first world class hotel) as leverage.

¶13. (C) A fractured Military: Ennahoui asserted that many of the members of the High Council of State were not at all comfortable with Aziz whose personal ambition was starting to outpace his stated concern for the nation and the armed forces. Ennahoui understood General Ghazwani had been extremely upset by Aziz's auto-proclamation of himself as head of the High Council of State before the Council had even met. When asked what Aziz would do if his coup was failing, Ennahoui said "he will never decide to leave on his own." He saw the possibility that Aziz could be made to step back by the other members of the High Council of State if they saw no chance of success. That said, Ghazwani has gained too much from Aziz and is ultimately afraid to stand up to Aziz. Ennahoui says the head of the Surete, Mohammed Ould Cheikh al Hadi, as the one most respected by military and civilians alike who could be the catalyst of a decision to push Aziz aside. Ghazwani could be brought along, but al Hadi or someone else would have to take the lead.

¶14. (C) Abdallah's failings. Ennahoui criticized Abdallah for his naivete in his dealings with the military. When asked about the accusations of corruption, Ennahoui insisted that the President was as clean as anyone he knew; however, when pushed further, he admitted that Abdallah's wife is a different matter and may, ultimately, be Abdallah's Achilles heel. "If you think the President's relationship with Aziz has been bad, his marriage has

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been worse," with the President constantly trying -- and usually failing -- to contain his wife's avarice. Ennahoui also saw Abdallah as ultimately giving into ego particularly in reinstating Prime Minister Waghef in what Ennahoui said was a pitiful effort to exert "I am here!" after caving to the military yet again. Ennahoui had been little impressed by Waghef's skills and saw him as "part of the problem." He did not see Waghef as playing a role if Abdallah is restored to his office.

Meeting with Leader of the Opposition Ahmed Ould Daddah

¶15. (C) DCM met afternoon of August 12 with President of

the Rally of Democratic Forces and official Leader of the Opposition Ahmed Ould Daddah to outline the U.S. position on the coup and express our disappointment with Daddah's reported support of the coup. Daddah, the second-place candidate in the Presidential elections, built his response as follows:

- It is incorrect to say the 2005 coup was the military starting the process leading to democracy -- that coup happened only because his party had turned the population and the military against a dictator.
- The military's stated desire to hand over the country to democracy was never sincere as they sought to place "their guy" Abdallahi in the Presidency.
- The 2007 elections were marred by fraud -- at least 20,000 voter cards were purchased from his supporters to keep them from voting for Daddah in Nouakchott alone.
- He accepted Abdallahi as President because it was more important to have some type of democratically elected president than risk the violence that would have come with a contested election. That said, Abdallahi never had a "true democratic mandate."
- Abdallahi had proven a useless leader. If he had planned to take on the military he should have done so at the beginning of his mandate. Not now when it was too late.
- None of Abdallahi's policies had advanced. Corruption is worse than ever. Crime is up. Drug traffic is up (and the Presidency had blocked a parliamentary inquiry). The key refugee return program was botched from the start. The anti-slavery law was all well and good but a policy to really dismantle the institution through economic support and land access for former slaves had never gotten off the ground.
- Abdallahi was blocking any and all constitutional methods that might have led to his ouster.

¶16. (C) Daddah had been in Tunis when the coup took place and, while condemning coups on principle, had accepted the Generals' move as the best end to a miserable situation. Noting he had lost support during the past year for "being too easy on Sidi" he acknowledged he was now losing some support for what was seen as abandoning democracy. Saying his own presidential interests were now on the back burner, he said now his priorities were (1) to avoid pain for the country, (2) to ensure that a "truly democratic process" leads to election of a "real president," and (3) to ensure that Abdallahi is not reinstated in a failed and ultimately illegitimate presidency. Towards this end he called for the U.S. to support a Mauritanian dialogue among parties, civil society and the military that coup led to a transition (perhaps under the President of the Senate) leading to free elections. DCM noted that such a dialogue with the just announced framework of the High Council of State in place would have as much validity and utility as a conference among prisoners in a prison. Other than, "we can't predict the results of the dialogue," Daddah had no suggestions on what would drive the military to give up power if not dealt with firmly now. In the end, the best he could say was "the military runs the governments in Algeria and Turkey, but you still deal with them."

NGOs and Civil Society

¶17. (SBU) DCM met August 10 with members of NGOs and civil
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society who support the coup. The members of civil society expressed support for the military junta who they describe as once again coming in to restore security and democracy. They described the military as the only institution that has the legitimacy and organization to be able to prevent civil war. They insisted on the fact that they believe that the country was heading toward civil war before the intervention of the military, describing President

Abdallahi as neglectful of the worsening social, economic, and political conditions. Despite Parliamentary efforts to work within the Constitution, President Abdallahi continued to govern in what they describe as "a democracy without legitimacy." They pleaded with the USG not to sanction the Mauritanian people for its governments wrongdoings.

An Afro-Mauritanian Perspective

¶18. (C) EconOff met August 10 with Ba Alassane, a civil society activist and president of COPECO, an Afro-Mauritanian organization seeking reparations for the events of 1989. Ba, a Pular, said that as a member of civil society, he opposed the coup as a matter of principle. However, he said that he supports neither President Abdallahi nor the military junta. He criticized Abdallahi for not "governing democratically" and accused both he and his wife of nepotism and corruption. He said that he cannot support the junta either because of the militarys role in the 1989 events and accusations of corruption. According to Ba, the Afro-Mauritanian community is split over the coup. He said that those who are politically active and understand the situation generally support the coup because they were well aware of the problems within the Abdallahi administration and the allegations of corruption. Those who are not politically active continue to support Abdallahi for his efforts to return the refugees.

¶19. (C) Ba said that during the last days of Abdallahis administration the country was heading toward civil war and the military stepped in to prevent it. He said that the current situation with General Aziz in power is now reality and is unlikely to change. Any effort to remove General Aziz short of elections will require bloodshed. He notes that different groups are forming within Mauritania, many opposed to each other, and the threat of civil war persists. With opposition to the coup in Mauritania and a much stronger reaction from the international community, he said that Aziz was likely caught off guard and is in a much more precarious position than he was anticipating. He suggests that Aziz may be looking for a way out. Ba states that he had a phone conversation August 10 with someone very close to Aziz asking for his assistance. Note: Ba is a member of the AJD/MR political party, one of the four political parties said to be in negotiations with the junta to form a transitional government. Ba said that Azizs advisor told him that Aziz is going to organize elections in a very short time period, resign shortly, and present himself as a civilian candidate in the elections.

20 (C) For Ba, the solution must be a Mauritanian solution. He says that Mauritians need to come together around a table and have an honest dialogue to find a solution, rather than have one imposed on them by the international community. Ba called on the junta to guarantee a timeframe for elections and to be neutral and not support any of the candidates. He added that the elections must also be financially transparent and candidates made to declare their campaign finances because last time the military was working behind the scenes to provide financial and material support to Abdallahi, their chosen candidate. He said that he was disappointed that the junta had already begun to back away from the election timeline that it had earlier put forth.

Meeting with Professor Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara

¶21. (C) EconOff met August 10 with Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara,

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professor emeritus at the University of Nouakchott and a

member of the last Electoral Commission. Kamara denounced the coup, calling it unacceptable. He called on the international community to take the following actions: call for the immediate release of President Abdallahi, demand that the transitional government not stay in power for more than three months, not allow the coup leaders to participate in the transitional government, and freeze the accounts and place travel bans on individual members of the junta. He believes that not allowing members of the junta and their immediate family to travel abroad to purchase goods would have a significant influence on them.

¶22. (C) While Kamara said that he was a strong supporter of the last coup and the electoral process, he said that he would refuse to participate in the elections again if asked. He said that holding new elections would be illegal because there is no provision for it in the constitution. He noted that if the junta were truly abiding by the constitution as it says that it is, it would have made the President of the Senate the interim President, not General Aziz. He envisions that the current political crisis will eventually be resolved through elections. He cautioned that the problems of the 2005-2007 transitional period and 2007 elections (i.e. military support for a candidate) must be avoided in the future. He says that a transitional government should not be allowed to form because it will lead to a recurring cycle of coups in Mauritania. He called on the international community not to finance the transitional period or the elections. He favors forming a committee composed of members of civil society, politicians, and the military, where all decisions are made by consensus, to lead the country for the next few months and organize elections. He stressed that members of the junta should not be allowed to participate in the committee. He lamented that there were no great leaders or intellectuals in Mauritania who were able to step in and mediate the political divisions between the President, the legislature, and the military to prevent the coup.

¶23. (C) Kamara also highlighted the precariousness of the current situation in Mauritania. He said Mauritians are tired of the divisions between the president and legislature and now is not a time to be playing politics while so many people are hungry. While characterizing President Abdallahi as "very naive," he also accused him of looking to start a civil war by naming new generals and colonels without neutralizing others, thus dividing the army. While many have accused the generals of playing politics behind the scenes and engineering the political crisis, he said that many civilian and political leaders were not happy and had begun coordinating with the generals. He used the "chicken and the egg" metaphor to describe the situation, indicating that it was not clear who really started the political crisis. He noted that while civil society is rapidly maturing, it is still young and fragile and there is a danger of politicizing it in the current atmosphere. He said that he does not believe that people participating in the pro-coup rallies are truly sincere, characterizing them as "rallies of opportunity." He noted that ministers have been traveling to the interior of the country to lead rallies, but most people are only participating because they hope that it will lead to personal benefits under the new regime.

Meeting with Released Refugee Program Head

¶24. (C) Ambassador and DCM met August 12 with Moussa Fall, director of the national refugee agency, who had been arrested with President Abdallahi and released on August Boulware